

Shelter Dorset with the Henry Brown Centre is named 'Hero of the Month' for January 2024

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It is the million dollar question that's on the lips of everyone working in homelessness prevention: how do we prevent families from losing their homes when so many are experiencing financial hardship as a result of the rising cost of living and the housing crisis?

Even before economic headwinds strengthened, charities and support services had been stepping up their focus on 'upstream prevention'. Put simply, this means engaging with people in need at an early stage, tackling problems head-on to prevent situations from spiralling out of control and taking a devastating toll on lives.

Last year, housing and homelessness charity Shelter, along with partners, teamed up with the Henry Brown Centre in West Howe, one of the region's most economically deprived wards, to trial an innovative new homelessness prevention project.

The success of the initiative led the Homelessness Partnership BCP to declare Shelter its **'Hero of the Month' for January 2024**, having built a successful pilot that now has the potential to be rolled out to more locations across the BCP area.

Kate Parker (pictured, above), Strategic Lead at Shelter in Dorset, said: "It became apparent at a homelessness prevention focus group that if we wanted to prevent people from losing their homes we would have to work with them upstream, before matters got to crisis point.

"We're all geared-up towards crisis work – when events can end up in the courts, or when people approach us because they've been served notice to leave their home. There were times when we could see that, if we had been given the opportunity to have a conversation with the family or household earlier, the outcome could have been so different."

Embracing creative thinking

While many members of the Homelessness Partnership BCP operate their own outreach services, Shelter, Citizens Advice and BCP Council decided to team up with the Henry Brown Centre to pilot the effectiveness of three-way working that embraces the spirit of collaboration and creative thinking.

Over a period of 14 weeks last summer, every Wednesday from 10am until midday, the project saw Citizens Advice helping the public with debt and welfare issues; while Shelter and BCP Council focused on housing and homelessness prevention.

People renting privately were signposted to the Partnership's Let's Talk Renting service (www.bit.ly/ltr2023) which offers free, professional advice to private tenants who are experiencing rent arrears or have been served with a Section 21 (no fault) eviction notice.

Kate added: "We decided on the Henry Brown Centre because it's so established in the heart of its community, with lots of other good work going on. They were really open to working with us. People were going to the Henry Brown and because we were there they'd chat to us. If we hadn't been on-site, they wouldn't have necessarily sought us out, and our conversations triggered alerts so we could help people at an early stage."

Over the summer, the teams helped locals to address a host of challenges, including dealing with rent arrears, anti-social behaviour, housing disrepair and domestic abuse.

Housing Rights Worker at Shelter, Steven Nicholson, pointed out: "The sessions highlighted the value in services working together to address the needs of those in the community. By working collaboratively, individuals attending the centre were able to get specialist advice from Partnership agencies and tasks could be actioned immediately without any unnecessary wait."

Upskilling volunteers for success

To enhance the level of advice provided by up to eight volunteers working on the project, training was provided on a host of useful platforms, from BCP Council's new Advice Aid website to effectively navigating online resources offered by Citizens Advice, Shelter and the Homelessness Partnership BCP.

Such is the level of enthusiasm for the project, that volunteers – who also dedicate their time to the Access to Food Partnership – have even put themselves forward to become 'housing champions'.

Jessie Budynkiewicz, Community Development and Volunteer Manager at Henry Brown, said: "Having Shelter working with us has been invaluable. By taking the time to pass on skills and knowledge to our volunteers, we have been able to keep these in the community and grow trust and resilience.

"This model aligns with our principles and Shelter is able to offer ongoing support. We are looking forward to seeing how it evolves and will be adding to our pool of housing champions this year."

The final word goes to Kate at Shelter. She sums up: "The collaboration has been amazing. The team has been empowered to help people identify and resolve issues. Not that long ago, if people were losing their homes we'd give them housing options advice. If you lose your home nowadays, the consequences are more dire – but addressed early, there's lots we can do. The importance of early prevention work cannot be underestimated."

For more information please visit <https://homelessnesspartnershipbcp.org>.